A “little groggy”: the deputy sheriff of Baltimore and his “bowl of toddy”

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Photograph of two hot toddy drinks

On December 21, 1776, Sergeant John Hardman of the Edward Veazey‘s Seventh Independent Company arrived at a public prison in Baltimore Town with captured British soldiers. [1] He was there escorting the British prisoners from Philadelphia. That night, Hardman ordered a “bowl of toddy” for the prisoners. Toddy, a popular drink originally adopted by the British, consisted of rum, hot water, and sugar.

Two other men, Daniel Curtis, the Baltimore County Sheriff, and John Ross, his deputy, asked for a “bowl of liquor.” [2] Ross, also a keeper of the town’s poor house, engaged in a friendly conversation with the prisoners, amongst whom Hardman was sitting. [3]

What happened next made people uneasy. Ross lifted the bowl of toddy, meant for the prisoners. He offered a toast, drinking to “damnation to General Washington & his army” and success “to Lord Howe & his army,” as well as to Lord Dunmore. [4] It was not unusual that he made a toast. [5] However, guards, likely Continental soldiers, saw his loyalty as antagonistic to the revolutionary cause. Since the Stamp Act in 1765, British royalty were praised less than the American colonists in toasts. This was magnified after independence.

Ross’s toast was particularly inflammatory in Baltimore. In 1775, Dunmore, then Governor of Virginia, declared that enslaved blacks and indentured servants who joined British ranks would become free. While few servants and enslaved blacks responded to his proclamation, the order echoed through the Chesapeake Bay as Dunmore formed the “Ethiopian Regiment.” [6] When Ross toasted to Dunmore, the prison guards were sure he was a sympathizer of the British Crown.

By the second toast, Ross, appearing a “little groggy,” asked the prisoners to drink “the same toast.” [7] The prisoners refused and Ross became belligerent. He drank the toddy, declaring that “they should not drink his toddy,” and that the prisoners should get a bowl for themselves. Then, appearing to “be a little in liquor,” he changed his allegiance. Ross “drank damnation to General or Lord Howe.” [8] Afterward,

Hardman “challenged the said Ross,” saying he “would mark him” down for his disturbing conduct. Later, Hardman asked several people about Ross’s identity. [9]

James Calhoun, Chairman of the Committee of Observation for Baltimore Town, a provisional government in Baltimore, compiled depositions about the event in January 1777. [10] Ross was told to attend the next meeting of Maryland Council of Safety. On January 27, Ross appeared before the Council to directly address Hardman’s complaint, but Hardman was not present. [11] This was likely because he had enlisted in the Second Maryland Regiment and was not in the state at the time. The Council told Ross to appear before the Maryland General Assembly the following month on February 10. The resolution of this incident is not known. [12]

Drunken outbursts were common during colonial times. In 1770, every American over age 15, drank an average of about six shot glasses of whiskey, which is about 40 percent alcohol, every day! [13] With drinking alcohol as an important past time, it was viewed as pleasant and useful by fellow colonists. While public drunkenness was illegal, drinking played a central role in social activities, with taverns and public houses serving as places to drink and forums for revolutionary ideas. [14]

The Revolutionary War also changed Americans’ drinking habits. Americans settled on whiskey as a substitute for molasses and rum which were limited by the British naval blockade. [15] During the war, troops of the British and Continental armies were issued rations for alcohol but both armies prohibited drunkenness. [16] After the war, alcohol consumption declined slightly, but increased after 1790. [17] The spike in alcohol consumption ended with the success of the temperance movement in the nineteenth century, with more Americans criticizing alcohol use. [18]

– Burkely Hermann, Maryland Society of the Sons of American Revolution Research Fellow, 2016.

Notes

[1] Journal and Correspondence of the Maryland Council of Safety, January 1-March 20, 1777, *Archives of Maryland Online* Vol. 16, 47, 48; Deposition about the statements of John Ross, Sub-Sheriff in Baltimore, December 23, 1776, Maryland State Papers, Red Books, Red Book 13, MdHR 4575-179 [MSA S989-19, 1/6/4/7]; Proceedings and Acts of the General Assembly, 1766-1768, *Archives of Maryland Online* Vol. 61, 14, 86, 87, 185, 299, 308, 310, 361, 368, 387, 389, 390, 393, 442, 520; Proceedings and Acts of the General Assembly, 1769-1770, *Archives of Maryland Online* Vol. 62, 126; Journal and Correspondence of the Council of Maryland, 1780-1781, *Archives of Maryland Online* Vol. 45, 71, 72; Proceedings and Acts of the General Assembly, 1771 to June-July, 1773, *Archives of Maryland Online* Vol. 63, 37, 282; Correspondence of Governor Sharpe, 1757-1761, *Archives of Maryland Online* Vol. 9, 421; Proceedings and Acts of the General Assembly, October 1773 to April 1774, *Archives of Maryland Online* Vol. 64, 199, 337; Journal and Correspondence of the Maryland Council of Safety, January 1-March 20, 1777, *Archives of Maryland Online* Vol. 16, 374. The British soldiers, recruited in North Carolina, may have been captured at the Battle of White Plains. Hardman was under the command of Levin Winder, who had recently been appointed as a captain.

[2] Journal and Correspondence of the Maryland Council of Safety, January 1-March 20, 1777, *Archives of Maryland Online* Vol. 16, 47. When Hardman describes Ross as a "sub-sheriff" this means that Ross is an assistant or deputy sheriff.

[3] Deposition about the statements of John Ross, Sub-Sheriff in Baltimore; Proceedings and Acts of the General Assembly, 1769-1770, *Archives of Maryland Online* Vol. 62, 387, 403; Journal and Correspondence of the Maryland Council of Safety, January 1-March 20, 1777, *Archives of Maryland Online* Vol. 16, 47; Paul Starr, *The Social Transformation of American Medicine: The rise of a sovereign profession and making of a vast industry* (USA: Basic Books, 1982),105; Seth Rockman, *Scraping By: Wage Labor, Slavery, and Survival in Early Baltimore* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 1, 194-196, 199-200, 203, 205-208, 210-212, 337; Camilla Townsend, *Tales of Two Cities: Race and Economic Culture in Early Republican North and South America: Guayaquil, Ecuador, and Baltimore, Maryland* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000), 37, 39, 122, 283-284; Proceedings and Acts of the General Assembly, 1766-1768, *Archives of Maryland Online* Vol. 61, 96; Proceedings and Acts of the General Assembly, October 1773 to April 1774, *Archives of Maryland Online* Vol. 64, 23; Journal and Correspondence of the Council of Maryland, 1780-1781, *Archives of Maryland Online* Vol. 45, 178, 267, 581; Journal and Correspondence of the Council of Maryland, 1789-1793, *Archives of Maryland Online* Vol. 72, 347; Journal and Correspondence of the Council of Maryland, 1781-1784, *Archives of Maryland Online* Vol. 48, 150; Proceedings and Acts of the General Assembly, October 1773 to April 1774, *Archives of Maryland Online* Vol. 64, 259, 260, 261, 262, 263, 264, 265, 266, 267, 268, 269. Interestingly, no hard liquors were allowed in the poor house. The poor house, also called an almshouse, on the outskirts of Baltimore Town, was created to serve as "relief" for the poor. It aimed to "reform" the poor to not be disorderly and engage in "meaningful" work.

[4] Deposition about the statements of John Ross, Sub-Sheriff in Baltimore; Journal and Correspondence of the Maryland Council of Safety, January 1-March 20, 1777, *Archives of Maryland Online* Vol. 16, 46. The prison guards may have also been suspicious of him considering that he never praised the Continental Army and George Washington in any of his toasts.

[5] Peter Thompson, ""The Friendly Glass": Drink and Gentility in Colonial Philadelphia." *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 113, no. 4 (1989): 553, 557-558, 560; Richard J. Hooker, "The American Revolution Seen through a Wine Glass." *The William and Mary Quarterly* 11, no. 1 (1954): 52-77; Thaddeus Russell, *A Renegade History of the United States* (New York: Free Press, 2010), 5. Not all of those who are toasted were praised. Hardman suspected Ross as "a Tory."

[6] Gary B. Nash, *Red, White, and Black: The Peoples of Early North America* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2000, fourth edition), 274-275; Ray Raphael, *A People's History of the American Revolution* (New York: Perennial, 2002, second edition), 309-311, 316, 320-327, 331-332, 335, 342, 355, 358, 385, 397; Ronald Hoffman, *A Spirit of Dissension: Economics, Politics and the Revolution in Maryland* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 184-185. This regiment fought in the Battle of Great Bridge (1775) near Chesapeake, Virginia before many of those in the regiment succumbed to smallpox. In later years, every time British ships would come down the Chesapeake Bay, runaway slaves would flock to the incoming ships. Enslaved blacks renounced their owners and

flocked to British lines, with some fugitives attacking plantations of their former masters on the Eastern Shore. Not surprisingly, desperate slaveowners in Maryland appealed to the state government, originally the Maryland Council of Safety, asking them for assistance.

[7] Journal and Correspondence of the Maryland Council of Safety, January 1-March 20, 1777, *Archives of Maryland Online* Vol. 16, 46, 47.

[8] Deposition about the statements of John Ross, Sub-Sheriff in Baltimore.

[9] Deposition about the statements of John Ross, Sub-Sheriff in Baltimore. This is interesting considering that earlier prisoners had told Ross who Hardman was.

[10] Journal and Correspondence of the Maryland Council of Safety, January 1-March 20, 1777, *Archives of Maryland Online* Vol. 16, 46, 47. These people made depositions: Elizabeth Dewit, wife of prison guard Thomas Dewit, prison guard Constantine O'Donnell, John Hardman, sergeant of Edward Veazey's company, Ross's associate Daniel Curtis, and civil servant William Spencer.

[11] Journal and Correspondence of the Maryland Council of Safety, January 1-March 20, 1777, *Archives of Maryland Online* Vol. 16, 59, 60, 83.

[12] Journal and Correspondence of the Council of Maryland, April 1, 1778 through October 26, 1779, *Archives of Maryland Online* Vol. 21, 568. Ross appears again in October 1779 asking for, along with a number of others, a recount in an "unfair" county election of sheriffs, but the Council of Maryland refused to do that, saying that the election was "valid & effectual."

[13] Jessica Kross, ""If You Will Not Drink with Me, You Must Fight with Me": The Sociology of Drinking in the Middle Colonies." *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 64, no. 1 (1997): 28; W.J. Rorabaugh, *The Alcoholic Republic: An American Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 10; Russell, 6-7; *Alcohol and Drugs in North America: A Historical Encyclopedia*, Vol 1: A-L (ed. David M. Fahey and Jon S. Miller, Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 2013), 84; W. J. Rorabaugh, "Alcohol in America." *OAH Magazine of History* 6, no. 2 (1991):17. Americans drank whiskey that "80 proof," referring to the weight of an average spirit and indicating the drink is 40 percent alcohol. Historian Jessica Kross said that this number "might well understate beer consumption and assumes women drank more than men" which was echoed by other scholars. Americans, of all ages, guzzled three and half gallons of alcohol per year, on average. They drank rum and cider at every meal.

[14] Kross, 43; Peter Thompson, ""The Friendly Glass": Drink and Gentility in Colonial Philadelphia." *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 113, no. 4 (1989): 549; Russell, 20, 26; Christine Sismondo, *America Walks Into A Bar: A Spirited History of Taverns and Saloons, Speakeasies and Grog Shops* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), xv, 54, 78-79; Peter Thompson, *Rum Punch and Revolution: Taverngoing and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 13, 20, 75, 143, 145. Taverns were also places for revolutionary recruiting and organizing. Politicians even fished for votes among inebriated citizens.

[15] Rorabaugh, 17; Mark Edward Lender and James Kirby Martin, *Drinking In America: A History* (New York: The Free Press, 1987), 31. At the same time, rum consumption declined since rum became associated with Great Britain.

[16] Mark Edward Lender and James Kirby Martin, *Drinking In America: A History* (New York: The Free Press, 1987), 32; Eric Burns, *The Spirits of America: A Social History of Alcohol* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004), 16; Sarah H. Meachan, *Every Home a Distillery: Alcohol, Gender, and Technology in the Colonial Chesapeake* (Baltimore: JHU Press, 2009), 5, 95. George Washington specifically hated alcohol abuse even though he ordered alcohol for his men, as a morale booster.

[17] Rorabaugh, 10; Korss, 48; Thompson, 549; Russell, 28, 30, 33; Sharon V. Salinger, *Taverns and Drinking in Early America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 246, 252, 282; Rorabaugh, 21, 25, 36, 67, 136, 149-150, 167, 219; Mark Edward Lender and James Kirby Martin, *Drinking In America: A History* (New York: The Free Press, 1987), 38, 46; *The Concise Princeton Encyclopedia of American Political History* (ed., Michael Kazin, Rebecca Edwards, and Adam Rothman, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2011), 405. Americans continued to drink in huge quantities, despite the failed efforts of temperance advocates, like Benjamin Rush, to limit consumption in taverns, inns, and drinking houses.

[18] Peter McCandless, *Slavery, Disease, and Suffering in the Southern Lowcountry* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 196, 272; *Drugs in America: A Documentary History* (ed. David F. Musto, New York: New York University Press, 2002), 3; Scott C. Martin, "Introduction: Toward a Cultural Theory of the Market Revolution," *Cultural Change and the Market Revolution in America, 1789-1860* (ed. Scott C. Martin, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005), 3; Mitchel P. Roth, *Crime and Punishment: A History of the Criminal Justice System* (Second Edition, United States: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2010), 112; Marvin Kitman, *The Making of the President 1789: The Unauthorized Campaign Biography* (New York: Grove Press, 1989), 40.

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